



The Intent—Effect Phenomenon

When we discover we discounted someone, our first thought is usually, *“Wow, that isn’t what I meant! I never intended to put you down.”* Our **Intent** was positive, but our **Effect** was negative.



The corollary to **Discount-Revenge** is **Intent-Effect**.

The **Intent-Effect** dynamic in relationships is sometimes the catalyst for a discount-revenge cycle starting.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“How did you get that from what I said?”

“My intent was to help the situation, not hurt it.”

If you relate to these statements, then you grasp the concept of **Intent-Effect**. There is seldom meanness or negative intent behind someone’s

words or actions. Unfortunately, the effect of our words and actions can be quite different than our intent.

Here's why: **Intent** is determined from the speaker's perspective. **Effect** is determined from the listener's perspective: Their frame of mind, their current psychological and emotional state, directly impacts **Effect**, regardless of our **Intent**. **In conversations, the effect is all that matters.** How the other person experiences our words and actions determines their actions regardless of our intent.

So there you have it: **Discounts are in the mind of the receiver and Intent is in the mind of the sender.** It's obvious how people can get disconnected from one another and never know why.

Since the vast majority of the time most people are speaking from positive intent, it's very useful for us to appreciate and respond to the intent we infer behind what we hear, rather than responding to the effect it has on us. Not so easy to do sometimes, but when you can do it, you'll be amazed at the difference it makes.

Example: Person A says, *"You'd be stupid to take that to management. They'll be all over you."* Person B, not liking being called stupid and not liking being threatened with management's displeasure, would like to defend herself, and explain to A how: 1. She's certainly not stupid, and 2. Why she intends to take it to management. This can easily result in an

argument about the pros and cons of how management might or might not respond.

Fortunately, Person B is a savvy communicator, so instead of defending herself, she says, *“I appreciate that you may be trying to protect me. I’d like to share with you my thinking behind this and get your ideas for how I might proceed.”*

B has sussed out A’s intention: A cares about B and doesn’t want to see her get into what A perceives as trouble. (Notice that B has ignored being called stupid.) She’s not promising to not take it forward; she’s inviting A’s thinking, which may or may not influence her decision to move forward.

And how about when you feel really discounted (can’t ignore what was said the way B just did)? When something really offends you, it’s not always possible to pause and figure out the positive intent behind the statement. A smart response when you feel intensely discounted is to pause for a moment so you can offer a paraphrase that includes the discount you felt. *“Gosh, when you said XXX, it sounded to me like you were saying YYY. Is that right?”* Better to ask than to endanger the relationship.

And what should you do when you sense that you’ve inadvertently discounted someone? It’s important to act quickly if you can. However, often when you ask, *“Oh, did I/that bother/offend you?”*, the person responds, *“Oh, no. I’m fine.”* But your gut tells you otherwise. Most of the

time I advise that if you sense you've offended someone, instead of asking if you offended, try explaining your thinking behind your statement "*What I'm thinking is...*", or, "*What I mean to say is...*" If you have discounted them in some way, you might have made it better. If you haven't discounted them, all you've done is explain how you're thinking. No harm there.

Assuming positive intent is a powerful tool in relationships. It's a good way to avoid feeling discounted. It's a valuable way to connect with others.